

Message Text

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ACTION AF-04

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RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8119
INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
AMEMBASSY KINSHASA
AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGUI 0022

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINS, CT

SUBJECT: RING OUT THE OLD YEAR - RING IN THE NEW: CENTRAL
AFRICA IN TRANSITION

REF: BANGUI 2342

SUMMARY: AFTER A YEAR OF TUMULTUOUS EVENTS INCLUDING AN
ATTEMPTED COUP D'ETAT, A REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT AND THE
PROCLAMATION OF AN EMPIRE, THE CAE ENTERS 1977 UNCERTAIN ABOUT
ITS FUTURE. A SERIES OF ALTERNATIVES SEEM TO BE AHEAD: A
CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY, VIOLENT UPHEAVAL OR A CONSTINUATION
OF THE CAPRICIOUS ONE-MAN RULE OF THE PAST. THE SIGNALS
ARE CONFLICTING, BUT WHAT IS CERTAIN IS THAT THE RULES
OF THE GAME HAVE CHANGED. AS WE WAIT TO SEE HOW THE
SITUATION EVOLVES, WE EXPECT THE CAE TO CONTINUE ITS BASICALLY
MODERATE, PRO-WESTERN FOREIGN POLICY. OUR COMMERCIAL
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INTERESTS ARE UNLIKELY TO BE ADVERSELY AFFECTED AND
AMERICAN PROGRAMS WILL PROBABLY BE AS WELCOME AS EVER.
END SUMMARY.

1. ALTHOUGH THE BUNTING WAS OUT AND THE REVIEWING STANDS
ERECTED, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ELEVEN YEARS THE NEW
YEARS'S ANNIVERSARY OF BOKASSA'S ACCESSION TO POWER WAS

NOT CELEBRATED IN BANGUI. ON A NOTE OF UNACCUSTOMED SOBRIETY ENDED WHAT HAD BEEN A YEAR OF HISTORIC AND DRAMATIC EVENTS: A YEAR WHICH HAD SEEN AT LEAST ONE COUP D'ETAT ATTEMPT; THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT AND OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH REVOLUTIONARY REGIMES IN LIBYA AND CHINA; THE SHORT-LIVED CONVERSION OF THE PRESIDENT TO ISLAM; AND FINALLY, IN EARLY DECEMBER, THE PROCLAMATION OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN EMPIRE.

2. IF 1976 BEGAN WITH BOKASSA SEEMINGLY AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POWERS, WITH HIS DOMINATION OVER THE POLITICAL SCENE IN THE CAR TOTAL, 1977 BEGAN IN UNCERTAINTY AND QUESTIONING. IF THE VENTS OF 1976 SHOOK THE REGIME AND CONCEIVABLY BOKASSA'S OWN HOLD ON THE LEVERS OF STATE, THE PROOF WOULD ONLY COME IN 1977.

3. FOR BOKASSA THE DRIVING MOTIVE FORCES OF THE PAST YEAR HAVE BEEN FEAR, MONEY AND AMBITION. SECURITY HAS BEEN A CONSTANT PREOCCUPATION SINCE THE FEBRUARY ATTENTAT. MANY OF THE DEVELOPMENTS OF THE YEAR CAN BE EXPLAINED IN TERMS OF THE SEARCH FOR SECURITY; THE STRENGTHENING OF BOKASSA'S PERSONAL GUARD; THE COZYING UP TO NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES AND PARTICULARLY POTENTIAL ENEMIES SUCH AS LIBYA; THE WITHDRAWAL FROM PUBLIC ACTIVITIES AND EXPOSURE. THE CREATION OF THE EMPIRE HAS NOT DIMINISHED THESE CONCERNS AND, GIVEN THE SCEPTICISM WITH WHICH IT HAS BEEN GREETED AT HOME AND ABROAD, MAY EVEN HAVE ACCENTUATED THEM.

4. WITH THE ECONOMY TEETERING ON THE BRINK OF BANKRUPTCY,
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THE SEARCH FOR READY CASE REMAINED A CONSTANT PREOCCUPATION. FOREIGN RELATIONS CONTINUED TO BE JUDGED IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT. CERTAINLY THE HOPE, NOW LITTLE MORE THAN A GLINT IN THE IMPERIAL EYE, OF VAST INPUTS FROM LIBYA AND CHINA, WERE FACTORS IN BOKASSA'S CONVERSION TO ISLAM AND HIS ABRUPT BREAK WITH TAIPEI. 1976 WAS INDEED A YEAR FULL OF PROMISES. AGREEMENTS TO CREATE NEW INDUSTRIAL, AGRICULTURAL AND MINING SOCIETIES TO EXPLOIT THE RESOURCES OF THE COUNTRY WERE SIGNED WITH BREATHTAKING FREQUENCY. THE ACTUAL RESULTS HAVE BEEN MEAGER. THE ECONOMY CONTINUES TO SINK. COTTON, COFFEE AND DIAMOND PRODUCTION IS DOWN; INPUTS OF KEY COMMODITIES SUCH AS PETROLEUM HAVE BEEN HALVED; AND THERE HAS BEEN AN ALMOST TOTAL LACK OF NEW INVESTMENT. FEW OBSERVERS ANTICIPATE AN EARLY UPTURN AND EVEN THE CAE'S MOST LONG-SUFFERING AND HIGHEST-PAYING FRIEND, FRANCE, MAY BE BEGINNING TO HAVE SECOND THOUGHTS.

5. FINALLY THERE WAS AMBITION, THE FORCE WHICH LEAD A FORMER NCO IN THE FRENCH ARMY THROUGH THE POLITICAL AND

MILITARY RANKS TO THE DIGNITIES OF PRESIDENT FOR LIFE,
FIELD MARSHAL AND, SINCE DECEMBER 4, EMPEROR. MUCH
EFFORT IS BEING MADE IN BANGUI, BY SENIOR
POLITICANS, INCLUDING THE PRIME MINISTER, TO EXPLAIN
THE EMPIRE TO CENTRAL AFRICANS IN TERMS OF THE NEED TO
GIVE THE COUNTRY A WORTHY PLACE INTERNATIONALLY, WHERE
IT WILL BE RESPECTED BY ITS NEIGHBORS AND, MORE
IMPORTANTLY, BY THE WHITE WORLD OF FORMER COLONIALISTS.
FEW ARE DELUDED BY THIS ASSERTION, AND MOST REGARD THE
EMPIRE AS THE ULTIMATE VANITY OF BOKASSA HIMSELF.

6. OUR 2342 COMMENTED ON THE INHERENT UNCERTAINTY OF
THE IMPERIAL STRUCTURES. NOTHING IN THE FIRST MONTH OF
THE EMPIRE HAS DIMINISHED THIS UNCERTAINTY. THE EMPEROR
HAS WITHDRAWN FROM PUBLIC VIEW, A CUMBERSOME IMPERIAL
PROTOCOL IS BEING ELABORATED, BUT LITTLE HAS BEEN DONE TO
GIVE REALITY TO THE PARLIAMENTARY AND DEMOCRATIC ELEMENTS
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OF THE NEW CONSTITUTION.

7. THUS, AS 1977 BEGINS, IT IS AS THOUGH THE COUNTRY IS
IN SUSPENDED ANIMATION, HOLDING ITS BREATH TO SEE HOW THE
EMPIRE WILL EVOLVE. A NUMBER OF HYPOTHESES ABOUT THE

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ACTION AF-04

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CIAE-00 DODE-00 SP-02 PM-03 L-01 PRS-01 EB-03 EA-06
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FM AMEMBASSY BANGUI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8120

INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY KINSHASA

AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

RUQMTINTAMEMBASSY TRIPOLI 0056

AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BANGUI 0022

LIMDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PARA 12 LINE 3 TO READ THERE
ARE NO SIGNS OF VICE THERE ARE SINGS OF ETC..)

SITUATION ARE CURRENT. OLD-TIMERS ASSERT WITH CONFIDENCE
"PLUS CA CHANGE, PLUS CA RESTE LA MEME CHOSE". IN THEIR
VIEW, BOKASSA IS STILL THE MASTER MANIPULATOR, PERHAPS
PULLING THE STRINGS FROM BEHIND THE IMPERIAL FORTIFICATION
AT BOBANGUI BUT NONETHELESS IN FULL CMMAND. THIS THE MOST WIDELY
HELD, VIEW SEES THE CONSTITUION AS A CHARADE, THE MINISTERS AS
PLIANT CREATURES OF BOKASSA'S WILL, AND THE FUTURE DETERMINED
BY THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY, BOKASSA'S ABILITY TO ISOLATE
POTENTIAL OPPONENTS, AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH INCIPIENT DISSATIS-
FACTION CAN BE DEFLECTED TO THE NEW GOVERNMENT. THE OLD-TIMERS
DO NOT RULE OUT CHANGE IN 1977, BUT THEY ARE INCLINED TO HAVE
FAITH IN BOKASSA'S MANIPULATIVE SKILLS AND TO POINT TO HIS
ENDURANCE RECORD, ONE OF THE BEST IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA.

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8. THESE ARE, IN CONTRAST, THE PESSIMISTS, AMONG WHOM MUST BE
COUNTED VIRTUALLY ALL THE AFRICAN AMBASSADORS. THEY SEE ALL
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AS CHANGES FOR THE WORSE. THEY EXPECT VIOLENCE
TO INTERVENE SOONER RATHER THAN LATER, AND THEY ARE CONVINCED THAT
ACTIVE PLOTTING IS GOING ON AGAINST BOKASSA EITHER WITHIN OR
WITHOUT THE COUNTRY. WE CANNOT CONFIRM THEIR VIEW, BUT IT IS
CERTAINLY POSSIBLE. AT A MINIMUM THESE AFRICANS REFLECT THE
MOCKING CONTEMPT WITH WHICH THE EMPIRE IS REGARDED IN AFRICA.

9. THERE ARE ALSO OPTIMISTS WHO, WHILE NOT TAKING ALL THE
IMPERIAL RHETORIC AT FACE VALUE, BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A REAL
CHANCE THAT THE SYSTEM CAN AND WILL BE PEACEFULLY MODIFIED.
THEY POINT TO THE GENEROUS RECENT AMNESTY, THE PROVISIONS FOR
A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY IN THE CONSTITUTION, AND THE APPARENT
DEVOLUTION OF POLITICAL POWER TO PRIME MINISTER PATASSE AND THE
NEW COUNCIL OF MINISTERS, SEVERAL OF WHOM ARE ABLE, APOLITICAL
TECHNOCRATS. THEY BELIEVE BOKASSA MAY INDEED BE TIRED OF POWER,
ANXIOUS TO RETIRE, AND WILLING TO BEGIN TO HAND OVER TO A NEW
GENERATION. THEY WOULD HAVE THE CAE'S FRIENDS WORK TO SUPPORT
THIS TENDENCY. CERTAINLY, ALL ARE AGREED THIS WOULD BE THE BEST
SOLUTION TO THE CAE'S PROBLEMS, ALTHOUGH FOR THE MOMENT A
PRUDENT SKEPTICISM WOULD SEEM CALLED FOR.

10. FINALLY, THERE ARE THE PERPLEXED FOR WHOM THE SIGNALS ARE
MIXED. IF BOKASSA IS STILL IN COMMANE, AS HE SEEMS TO BE, WHY

HAS HE WITHDRAWN TO BOBANGUI AND WHY DID HE ACCEPT A SEEMINGLY DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTION? ONE EXPLANATION IS THAT BOKASSA WAS PRESSURED TO WITHDRAW FROM THE LIMELIGHT - THAT THE CONSTITUTION AND THE SUBSEQUENT LIMITING OF HIS DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN ACTIVITIES WERE THE "PRICE" HE HAS HAD TO PAY TO MESAN TO BECOME EMPEROR. BUT IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT BOKASSA HIMSELF IS AMBIVALENT ABOUT HIS ROLE AND THAT THE PRESENT SITUATION REFLECTS THIS AMBIVALENCE. BOKASSA MAY WANT TO BECOME LESS ACTIVE, BUT HE ALSO PROBABLY WISHES TO CONTINUE TO BE EMPEROR AND TO RETAIN ULTIMATE CONTROL. HE IS NOT QUITE SURE HOW TO ACCOMPLISH THIS - AND THE CURRENT LACK OF GOVERNMENTAL CONFIDENTIAL

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LEADERSHIP MAY REFLECT THIS FACT.

11. WHAT HE HAS DONE TO DATE IS TO ESTABLISH A STRUCTURE WHICH COULD PERMIT HIM TO GO EITHER WAY. AS YET NO MAJOR DECISIONS HAVE BEEN TAKEN AT EITHER THE GOVERNMENTAL OR IMPERIAL COURT LEVEL, AND WE CONSEQUENTLY HAVE NO BENCHMARK AGAINST WHICH TO ASSESS THE REAL LOCUS OF POWER, IF INDEED THERE IS ONE YET. THIS SITUATION HAS PRODUCED A GENERAL FEELING OF UNEASINESS AND UNCERTAINTY. NO ONE KNOWS QUITE WHO IS IN CHARGE OR IN WHAT DIRECTION THE SYSTEM IS MOVING. GIVEN THE LACK OF PRECEDENT FOR GRADUAL EVOLUTIONARY CHANGE, WE CANNOT SAFELY PREDICT THAT THE COUNTRY IS IN REALITY MOVING TOWARDS A PARLIAMENTARY MONARCHY AS THE EMPEROR'S DEFENDERS WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE. THERE REMAIN TOO MANY POSSIBILITIES FOR VIOLENT CHANGE - IF FOR EXAMPLE BOKASSA FEELS THAT HE IS LOSING TOO MUCH POWER OR IF OTHERS SENSE THAT THEY CAN MOVE TO TAKE POWER FROM HIM.

12. IN ANY EVENT WE SEE LITTLE IMMEDIATE CHANGE IN THE CAE'S FOREIGN POLICY, WHICH IS LIKELY TO REMAIN OPPORTUNISTIC, CONSERVATIVE AND OPEN TO WESTERN INFLUENCE. THERE ARE NO SIGNS OF RADICAL TENDENCIES IN THE GOVERNMENT, AND CERTAINLY AS LONG AS BOKASSA AND HIS ASSOCIATES REMAIN IN POWER HE WILL NEED AND SEEK THE FRIENDSHIP OF THE MAJOR POWERS, INCLUDING THE USA. SO, PRESUMABLY, WOULD HIS SUCCESSORS. WE ANTICIPATE THAT IN 1977 AT LEAST, OUR COMMERCIAL INTERESTS WILL NOT BE THREATENED, AND MAY EVEN BE IMPROVED, OUR AID PROGRAMS WILL CONTINUE TO BE WELCOME, AND OUR POLITICAL RELATIONS WILL REMAIN IN A STATE OF RELATIVE EQUILIBRIUM.

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